

From boom to bust: A short history of CFAC

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For about half a century, the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. plant provided the Flathead Valley with good paying jobs, taxes for schools and local government, and support for the local economy. The following is a timeline of the smelter's history, from groundbreaking to the present.

- In 1914, the Anaconda Company first considered producing aluminum in the Flathead Valley using power from a hydroelectric dam yet to be built there.

- In 1950, the Harvey Machine Co., of Torrance, Calif., announced plans to build an aluminum plant in the Flathead using power from the Hungry Horse Dam. At one point, the company began looking at purchasing 760 acres of land below Teakettle Mountain, north of Columbia Falls.

- On Nov. 15, 1951, The Anaconda Company, a global mining and metals corporation that started in Butte, announced it had purchased 95 percent of Harvey's interest. Anaconda planned to become the fourth aluminum-producing company in the U.S.

- On May 15, 1953, the Anaconda Aluminum Co. placed a large ad in the Hungry Horse News seeking interviews with workers for its new smelter plant. By June 1953, more than 750 people had applied.

- A ground-breaking ceremony at the plant took place on June 2, 1953. Foley Contractors, of Pleasantville, N.Y., was awarded the general construction contract on July 9, 1953. As many as 1,600 workers were employed building the aluminum smelter.

- In February 1955, a mile-long power line was strung across the Flathead River from the Bonneville Power Administration transmission lines in Columbia Heights to the new plant. At the same time, steel framework was going up for the 130-foot tall paste plant — the tallest building in the Flathead.

- At 9:15 a.m. on July 20, 1955, electrical power was first applied to some of the plant's 240 aluminum reduction pots.



First metal 60 years ago

First metal from the AAC plant being loaded onto railroad cars by forklift operator Clifford Shero on Aug. 24, 1955. Photo by Mel Ruder.

- A dedication ceremony for AAC's \$65 million plant took place on Aug. 15, 1955, with more than 2,000 residents in attendance, including Anaconda CEO and president Con Kelley and Montana Gov. Hugo Aronson.
- Eight years later, on Aug. 15, 1963, Anaconda chairman Clyde Weed announced plans to build a third potline at the AAC plant, adding 120 more reduction cells.
- Three years later, on Aug. 11, 1966, Anaconda announced plans to simultaneously build a fourth and fifth potline, bringing the total plant up to five potlines, 10 rooms and 600 reduction pots, with a capacity of 175,000 tons of metal per year.
- In July 1969, Clinton Carlson, an air pollution specialist hired by the U.S. Forest Service, reported on the impacts of fluoride emissions from the AAC plant on surrounding plant and animal life. Over time, concerns spread to private lands and Glacier National Park.
- In September 1970, Columbia Falls residents Loren and Mary Kreck filed a class action lawsuit against AAC claiming impacts by fluoride emissions at the plant. The lawsuit was dismissed without prejudice by Flathead County District Court Judge Robert C. Sykes on May 15, 1973, after it failed to receive adequate support from local residents.
- In 1976, Anaconda purchased aluminum reduction technology from Sumitomo, of Japan, and began updating the French-style Soderberg pots at a projected cost of \$42 million. That same year, Anaconda purchased dry scrubber air pollution control technology from Alcoa. The two technologies together enabled AAC to reduce fluoride emissions to new state limits and run the reduction pots at greater electrical efficiencies.
- In March 1976, ARCO began purchasing controlling stock interest in Anaconda. As owners of the Columbia Falls smelter, the company invested heavily in upgrading plant equipment, including purchasing French-made pin cranes. But by the early 1980s, the oil company began to back out of the metals business, closing the former Anaconda smelters across Montana.
- On April 22, 1985, led by the grass-roots group We Want The Plant, more than 3,200 people crowded into the Columbia Falls High School gymnasium in an attempt to persuade BPA representatives to lower electrical power prices and keep the aluminum plant running.
- In June 1985, private investors Brack Duker and Jerome Broussard began negotiating the \$1 purchase of the aluminum plant from ARCO. As part of the deal, concluded in September 1985, workers took wage and benefit cuts in exchange for future profit sharing under the new name Columbia Falls Aluminum Co.
- In 1992, CFAC accountant Bobbie Gilmore filed a lawsuit against CFAC claiming Duker and Broussard had failed to properly pay workers their share of the company's profits.

- On June 1, 1993, more than 1,200 locals, plant workers and government dignitaries gathered in the Columbia Falls High School gymnasium trying once again to persuade BPA to sell power to the aluminum smelter at lower rates.
- In January 1998, U.S. District Judge Jack Shanstrom held fairness hearings as the five-year long profit-sharing lawsuit wound down. Workers were awarded \$100 million. In May 1998, when workers received their share of the settlement, the total amounted to about 10 percent of the Flathead's entire annual payroll.
- In May 1999, Simon Trinca, a senior alumina trader for Glencore, a Swiss-based global commodities firm, announced Glencore had purchased CFAC.
- In late 2000, impacts of the West Coast energy crisis emerged from California, with rolling blackouts and soaring power prices. One by one, the Pacific Northwest's 10 aluminum smelters were forced into bankruptcy or curtailment.
- On Jan. 18, 2001, CFAC announced it had signed a power remarketing deal with the BPA. All remaining potlines would be shut down by Jan. 26. According to some sources, Glencore made from \$350 million to \$450 million by reselling its power back to the BPA.
- As the power market stabilized, CFAC re-energized one potline after the other, reaching 60 percent capacity by May 2002.
- Citing a "perfect storm" caused by lingering high power prices, continuing low metal prices, and alumina prices that had doubled by demand from China's growing aluminum industry, CFAC announced it would shut down two of its three potlines on March 11, 2003. With just one potline running, the plant still employed about 150 people with a payroll of about \$7.5 million.
- The CFAC smelter plant last made metal in October 2009. For the next few years, Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Tester worked on behalf of Glencore to line up a workable BPA power contract and get the plant up and running again. On several occasions, Tester expressed frustration about Glencore's lack of interest.
- On Dec. 17, 2012, three years after the CFAC smelter shut down entirely, Senator-elect Dee Brown, R-Hungry Horse, announced that she had asked the Flathead County Commissioners to take the lead in getting the plant designated a Superfund site.
- In April 2013, Glencore aluminum trader Matt Lucke came to Columbia Falls and told locals in a public meeting, "The CFAC plant is not for sale. We're not ready to give up."
- In September 2013, cyanide was found by the Environmental Protection Agency in very small amounts in two residential water wells near the CFAC plant site. Spent pot liner dumped in unlined landfills at the plant before 1985 was suspected of being the source of the contamination.

- On July 31, 2014, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality sent an administrative order on consent for a remedial investigation to Glencore outlining what the state expected the company to do as part of a cleanup process for the plant site.
- On Dec. 9, 2014, CFAC officials announced that the company “is no longer negotiating” with DEQ about cleaning up the smelter site. Glencore had hired Roux Associates to oversee a remedial investigation of the site.
- On March 3, 2015, CFAC announced the plant is closing for good. Demolition of some of the buildings would be part of the closure. The company said it was also looking for a buyer.